

The Future of the Shell: UNIX and Beyond

2021-06-03 1–2:30pm ET

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ABSTRACT

The UNIX shell is fifty years old, and it continues to be the primary way to configure, deploy, and manage systems of all kinds. What do the next fifty years hold? What is the command-line interface of the 21st century?

This 90-minute panel brings together researchers and engineers from disparate communities (systems, languages, security) to think about the shell’s strengths and weaknesses, challenges and opportunities around the shell, and the shell’s future.

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The shell is ubiquitous. It is an important system interface that developers and system administrators use for interacting with their systems. It is also the primary, default choice for scripting system orchestration, automation, and maintenance. Finally, it is used for quick prototyping of more complex solutions, especially in domains like data processing, data ingestion, and data cleaning. The shell’s composition primitives let scripts combine tools written in a variety of languages, making it an exemplar of extensibility.

The shell is also a confusing and dangerous object of disgust. There is little in the way of support, and best practices for shell scripting are not well known. The shell has been around for fifty years, but it has only just begun to enjoy the benefits of fifty years of advances in technology and tooling.

*Alphabetical order.

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Renewed Interest in the Shell. A combination of trends in containerization, data science, programming-language techniques, and the cloud have brought shell scripting back to prominence [1–10]: What does POSIX compliance really mean in the context of the shell [5]? What do package install scripts actually do [1]? Can we offload shell computations efficiently in the cloud [7]? How can we parallelize UNIX pipelines with minimal-to-zero user involvement [9]? Recent work addressed these long-standing questions—but a lot more work is underway, signaling (1) renewed interest in the classic shell and alternative variants, and (2) the emergence of a community thinking about its future applications.

Format. The 90-minute event (on June 3rd 2021 from 1–2:30pm ET) has a small panel of experts on shell-related topics. The event itself is discussion-based, with the panelists providing single-page statements of their interest in and vision for the shell, including one or more *challenge problems*, which will be distributed to participants in advance.

Introduction	10min
Panelists summarize statement	10min
Breakout in three topic-oriented rooms	30min
<i>Break</i>	5min
More breakout, attendees shuffle rooms	15min
Panelists summarize discussions for all attendees	15min
Closing	5min

The organizers will divide themselves among the breakout rooms to help record conversations.

Panel The panelists are Arjun Guha (Northeastern), Deepti Raghavan (Stanford), Chet Ramey (Case Western Reserve), and Diomidis Spinellis (AUEB; TU Delft).

Discussion topics The precise topic rooms will be determined by surveying panelists and participants. We anticipate two primary possibilities for choosing topics: following disciplinary distinctions (systems, languages, HCI) or following crosscutting concerns (safety, performance, expressivity).

Final report In collaboration with attendees, the organizers will produce a summary document of the panel, to be made available at <https://fut-shell.github.io/>.

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